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COMMUNIST CHINA: Kang Sheng, a member of the elite politburo standing committee, may be in serious trouble.

The latest rumor on the political demise of Chen Po-ta, another member of the standing committee, reinforces this impression.

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a story is circulating in the capital that at the major party plenum in late August - early September of last year both Chen and Kang--and to a much lesser extent, Madame Mao--were criticized for "extremist" activities during and since the Cultural Revolution. Whatever the reason for Chen's fall, he has been out of sight since 1 August, and it would appear that his fate is sealed.

The story provides no details of the charges against Kang, but the fact that he has not been in public view for four months suggests that he too has been sidelined if not actually purged. The recent assumption by another official of one of his duties--handling relations with foreign Communist parties--tends to support this conclusion.

There is no firm evidence to substantiate this account, but it does echo earlier stories on the same theme. Some aspects of the account also are supported by American journalist Edgar Snow's remark last month that Chinese officials had admitted to him that the leadership was still grappling with the problems of "extremists." Moreover, an investigation of the supporters of the "May 16 Corps"--an extremist group which is now said to have been organized by Chen--was a live issue in Peking last fall, according to recent information. Indeed, in recent weeks wall posters denouncing the "May 16" have appeared again in Peking.

Although the issues in dispute are extremely complex, it seems safe to assume that the fate of the fallen politburo members is linked to quarreling over post - Cultural Revolution reconstruction policies and perhaps over the shape of China's rebuilt party and government apparatus, which is heavily

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dominated by regional military leaders and veteran party cadres. Indeed, it also seems a distinct possibility that heavy criticism of this revamped political instrument by Chen and Kang may have pushed some of their more moderately inclined military and civilian associates on the politburo to coalesce against them.

Whatever the case, the balance of forces in Peking's unstable leadership coalition seems to have shifted dramatically since last fall, and the political setbacks suffered by Chen and Kang cast serious doubt on the future prospects of other former leaders of the radical Central Cultural Revolution Group. The heavy criticism in domestic propaganda of the political performance of senior military and civilian officials continues to suggest that whatever issues are troubling the politburo have not been resolved. Moreover, the regime's failure since last March to acknowledge publicly any of the breaks that have occurred in the ranks of the top leadership indicates that a covert power struggle of significant proportions is still being waged in Peking.

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